

# Sham Honesty

Dietrich von Hildebrand

There are many who would agree that our present approach to life is much more honest, more “authentic,” than that of the Victorian era with all its hypocrisy, conventionalism, and prudery. No longer does public opinion condemn things which most people have always done clandestinely anyway. No longer do we feel obliged to exhibit a polite and friendly demeanor when we actually feel nothing resembling friendliness. No longer are rigid, artificial, empty forms superimposed on our lives. No longer do we feel obliged to cling to traditional opinions. Modern man speaks his own personal opinions in full sincerity. He wants to see reality as it is.

But if we analyze this case for the special honesty of contemporary man we shall discover that it is in reality only a sham honesty.

In the first place, it is quite mistaken to believe that a person who does not live up to his moral ideals is therefore dishonest, or, to put it otherwise, that consistent agreement between one’s principles and one’s conduct is the criterion of honesty. It is certainly desirable for a man to live up to his moral convictions – provided that they are valid. But the all too frequent discrepancy between conduct and conviction is a tragedy rooted in man’s fallen nature. This is the perennial conflict of which Ovid says: “*Video meliora proboque; deteriora sequor*” [I see the better way and I approve of it; I follow the worse]. And St. Paul puts it: “For the good that I will I do not; but the evil that I will not, that I do.” This by no means implies a dishonest character.

To be sure, if a man does not intend to do what he recognizes to be morally right, if he can be indifferent to the moral necessity of action following upon principle – if he does what he knows to be morally wrong without suffering a burdened conscience – then morally, he is a very poor person indeed. But to say that he is dishonest is a great understatement. He is far worse than dishonest. His conduct betrays either a cynical wickedness or a brutish moral unscrupulousness. And the man who strives and fails to live up to what he has recognized to be morally good cannot in the least be said to be dishonest. On the contrary, for him to admit that the moral law and moral values are fully valid even though he has failed to live up to them is a definite indication of his honesty. What is dishonest – and what is indeed typical of our age – is for men to adapt truth to suit their actions, to take their *de facto* conduct as the norm and deny the validity of moral laws because they have not succeeded in living up to them.

Thus, before we can conclude anything from the formal agreement between a man’s moral convictions and his life, we have first to inquire whether this agreement is the result of his living up to his convictions or of his adjusting his convictions to fit his actions. And if the former is the case, we must also ask if his moral convictions are true or false, good or evil. Men who hold shallow, relativistic theories of morality, considering moral precepts mere “taboos,” nevertheless often manage in concrete situations to give the

morally right responses – to shrink from committing an act of cruelty or injustice – because in their immediate contact with reality they are aware of the ultimate validity and power of moral values. Men are in general more intelligent and closer to truth in their existential contact with life than in their theoretical reasonings about it. In such cases, agreement between action and theoretical conviction is nothing to be approved; rather, inconsistency between conviction and action is desirable and the question of honesty does not arise.

It is another grave error to believe that a man who has become morally blind and who therefore openly acts immorally is more honest than one who seeks to conceal his immorality from others. It is certainly deplorable for men to hide their immoral deeds only out of fear of public opinion. But the man who sees nothing wrong, for example, with sexual promiscuity and who speaks of it shamelessly is certainly no better. Nor is he honest or sincere. In the first place, the so-called Victorian hypocrite at least betrayed in his very hypocrisy an indirect respect for moral values. On the other hand, the shameless contemporary sinner, who has lost all sense of the immorality and meanness of sexual promiscuity, deserves not the slightest praise for his “honesty,” for he has no reason to hide his moral deviations. He no longer sees anything shocking in them and he has nothing to fear from public opinion since it has now become fashionable *not* to be shocked by promiscuity. What once entitled the Bohemian to regard himself as a revolutionary – no longer obtains. It is therefore difficult to understand why shamelessness should today be praised as courageous and honest.

Furthermore, there is a perfectly good reason for hiding our sins from the view of society. We are under the obligation to avoid giving a bad example or scandal to others. This bears no resemblance to the case of Tartuffe\* – the rascal who sanctimoniously assumes the role of a truly virtuous person with the intention of cheating others attracted by his apparent virtue. This is an extreme of dishonesty. The antithetical honesty here is not to be found in the shameless sinner who feels no need to cloak his sinfulness, but in the virtuous man who hides his virtues out of humility.

Another false conception of honesty widespread today appears in the assertion that our outward behavior should be in full agreement with our inner feelings and moods. A man who employs expressions of politeness that do not correspond with his true feelings is thus considered dishonest. No doubt, we can rightly speak of a certain dishonesty or lack of genuineness when a man behaves as if he were deeply moved, or overjoyed, or indignant, while actually experiencing nothing of the kind.

But it is nevertheless completely wrong to make our actual feelings the sole determinant of our outward behavior toward other persons. Rather, our behavior should conform to what our attitude *should* be. Whatever our real feelings about others, we should be polite and attentive to them. This is by no means dishonest – any more than it is an indication of honesty to be unfriendly, impolite, and inattentive to another person because we do not care for him.

This false conception of honesty makes an ideal of self-indulgence and letting oneself go. It precludes – in fact, it repudiates – the enrichment of life that observance of adequate forms makes possible. It ignores the moral significance and educational function of such forms of social intercourse. The very thing that constitutes the superiority of the well-mannered is discounted as a sign of dishonesty and insincerity. According to this conception of honesty the ideal honest man would necessarily be uncouth, lacking in all self-control and restraint.

This sham honesty appears in an especially grotesque form when it touches on man's relation to God. How often do we now hear such remarks on the Liturgy as: Why should I pray the *Confiteor* when I do not feel contrition? Why should I accuse myself of sins when I feel quite innocent, when I have not the slightest consciousness of sinfulness?

The answer, of course, is that my prayers to God should conform to objective reality and not to my accidental mood. I know that in reality I am sinful. I know, consequently, that I should feel contrition. This objective reality is the measure of the wording of my prayers to God. And the liturgical theme is the conformity of my prayers to the objective situation of man before God and therefore to what I *should* experience in such a confrontation. Here, the choice of words ought not to be dependent on what my feeling happens to be at the moment. The words are meaningful because they correspond to my true situation, to what I should be experiencing: the words are the objective expression of attitudes which should form me and into which I should want to grow. Not honesty, therefore, but the nadir of sham honesty is revealed in the man who, misunderstanding the very purpose of prayer (or, indeed, of any cultic act), proudly refuses to utter words that do not reflect his momentary mood. In taking his accidental moods as the only valid norm he betrays his self-centeredness and petty defiance.

But the error here goes much further still. In the Liturgy we participate in the prayer of Christ and of His Church. This prayer is intended to form our souls, not to express our individual limitedness. It is moreover a prayer spoken out of a spirit of communion with all brethren. Hence, even if my own soul is filled with joy at a given moment I can pray with the knowledge that many other persons are suffering and mourning: I know that the earth is a valley of tears. I have good reason, therefore, to pray the *De Profundis* even if I happen to feel only grateful joy for some great gift, or to pray a psalm of praise and thanksgiving while I am undergoing a great trial.

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\**Tartuffe*, a comedy in five acts by Molière relates the story of an attempt, by an irreclaimable hypocrite, to destroy the domestic happiness of a citizen who, charmed by his seeming piety, has received him as a prominent guest.

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Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977) was the son of a famous sculptor. He was a Catholic philosopher and religious writer, a brave anti-Nazi activist and outspoken Christian witness. This article is an excerpt from the chapter "Sham Honesty" in *Trojan Horse in the City of God* (1967).